DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 212 043 EA 014 316

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TITLE Understanding the Growth of Christian Schools.
PUB DATE 28 Aug 81
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Education Commission of the States (Cambridge, MA, August 28, 1981). Not available in paper copy due to light print of original document.

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Attitudes; Educational Quality; Elementary Secondary Education; *Parent Attitudes; *Parochial Schools; Protestants; *Religion; Religious Education

ABSTRACT

The number of independent fundamentalist Protestant schools and students has been increasing rapidly in the last few decades. Research in Kentucky and Wisconsin on administrators and parents in these Christian schools indicates the reasons why such schools are started and why families send their children to them. Administrators start Christian schools primarily for religious reasons--to promote their students' religious salvation and moral development and to offer alternatives to the public schools' "secular humanism"--and only secondarily for educational reasons. Parents send their children to fundamentalist schools both because of church membership and religion and because of dissatisfaction with public schools' academic quality, discipline problems, and violence. Parents continue patronizing Christian schools because they are satisfied with the quality of education, they can afford the tuition, and their children like the schools' small size and the commitment of the teachers. Two further reasons underlying the growth of fundamentalist Protestant schools are the philosophical disagreement between public and Christian schools over the nature of human beings and the current disintegration of the consensus on common American values. (RW)

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UNDERSTANDING THE GROWTH OF CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

paper presented to
the annual meeting of
the Education Commission
of the States
at
Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts
August 28, 1981

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EA 014 316

Fundamentalist Protestant schools comprise the most rapidly growing sector of American education today. While public school enrollments have declined by 12% during the last decade, and the enrollment in Roman Catholic schools now appears to have stabilized after experiencing a 40% decline between 1965 and 1975, fundamentalist Protestant schools (often referred to in their own communities as "Christisn" schools) are increasing rapidly in both the number of schools, and in the number of enrollees.[1]

Although it is impossible to obtain exact figures, due to the diversified nature of these schools, the National Institute of Education has estimated that enrollment in Christian schools doubled during the decade 1965 to 1975. More recently, the National Center for Educational Statistics estimated that enrollment in Christian schools exceeded one million for the first time in 1979.[2]

Proponents of Christian education take an even more optimistic view. Rev. Jerry Falwell, president of Moral Majority, and a strong supporter of Christian education, states that Christian schools have increased in number from 1400 schools in 1963 to 18,000 such schools today. He further states that new Christian schools are being established at the rate of four per day, and that if the present rate of growth continues, Christian schools will surpass public schools in enrollment within a decade.[3] Another advocate of Christian education, Dr. R. J. Rushdoony, extends this projection even farther, and predicts that if the present rate of Christian school growth can be sustained, "by the end of the century, public or state schools will have virtually disappeared."[4] It has not been possible to verify the accuracy of these figures and while they seem plausible, the projections based on them appear to be somewhat optimistic.

While logic suggests that a saturation point will eventually be reached, the overall potential for growth in the nonpublic sector of education is considerable. For example, the largest single group of Christian schools is composed of schools operated by independent Baptist churches. Baptist groups in the United States had an adult membership in excess of twenty-five million in the most recent survey, making them the single largest Protestant denomination in the United States.[5]

When other fundamentalist groups which operate schools are added to the Baptists, along with Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Adventists, and various Jewish groups which are engaged in nonpublic education but do not educate all the children of their church members, it becomes apparent that if these groups should all withdraw a large percentage of their children from the public school system, the impact on American public education would be profound. Further, this trend would be accelerated should any of the tuition tax credit plans or voucher plans now before Congress be enacted.

My own research on Christina schools in Kentucky and Wisconsin, conducted in 1979, indicated that the number of Christian schools in Kentucky increased by 313% in the decade 1969-1978, while the number of such schools in Wisconsin registered a gain of 420% during the same period. During these years, the number of students enrolled in Christian schools in Kentucky showed an increase of 420%, while the number of students enrolled in Christian schools in Wisconsin increased by 274%.[6]

This growth is striking, particularly in Wisconsin where there is no great desegregation problem. If these growth figures reflect national patterns - and there is no reason to suppose they do not - the implications for public education are even more disturbing.

To understand the reasons for the rapid growth of Christian schools, we must consider three questions: first, why do fundamentalist churches and their pastors establish these schools?; second, why do parents withdraw their children from public schools and enroll them in Christian schools?; and, third, once they have enrolled their children in Christian schools, why do parents continue to place them there year after year, rather than returning them to the public school system at some future point?

In answer to the first question, I found general agreement among Christian school administrators as to the reasons for which these schools had been established. They indicated that these schools existed to provide moral and spiritual instruction, that they employed only "Christian" teachers, and that they were actively seeking the salvation and spiritual development of their students. Only after listing these reasons, which are religious in nature, did they mention such educational issues as the desire to provide quality education, and differences in specific curricular areas, such as evolution and sex education.

It thus appears that whatever motives parents may have for patronizing these schools, the administrators who are operating them see themselves as engaged in an activity which is primarily religious in nature. This

point is reinforced by the finding that these schools did not attract a wide cross-section of the community, but drew at least three-quarters of their students from families of their own denomination. They also tended to attract students from the most devout segment of that membership; Christian school families generally attended church services several times a week. Parents of school children held one or more offices in the church. While this is hardly surprising, it reinforces the point that these schools are pervasively religious in character, and may reasonably be regarded as an extension of the religious ministry of the churches.

These administrators also see their schools as an alternative to the philosophy of secular humanism which they believe pervades public education, especially since the removal of prayer and Bible reading from public school classrooms in 1963.[7] They feel their schools offer a Christian choice, rather than an ecumenical echo.

In answer to the second question, the reasons for which parents patronize these schools appear to fall into two general categories. The first consists of reasons which are religious in nature. References to membership in the sponsoring church, or a personal conversion to religion, were frequent. Many parents also expressed a desire to have their children educated in a "religious environment." By this, they meant an environment which was free of such worldly influences as alcohol, tobacco, and profanity. Parents felt that there

was peer pressure to succumb to these influences in public schools, and they had withdrawn their children from public education in order to avoid this pressure. Parents also felt that if their children attended Christian schools, the children would be more likely to date and marry someone of their own religious persuasion.

A second group of factors leading parents to enroll their children in Christian schools may be characterized as dissatisfaction with the public schools of the community. Many of the parents whom I interviewed mentioned the poor academic quality of the public schools which their children had attended. Modern math was often singled out for criticism, as was the low reading level of public school students. Parents further insisted that even when their children had failed to perform satisfactorily in public schools, they had nevertheless been given satisfactory report card grades, and had received social promotions.

Another criticism frequently leveled at public education by Christian school students and their parents was the lack of discipline and the high level of violence in public schools. The forms of violence most frequently mentioned were fights and extortion. Many students with whom I talked believed that teachers in the public schools were afraid of their students, and therefore did not attempt to intervene when students were assulted. These feelings were summed up by a Lutheran minister who told me, "I would be afraid for my life if I walked into a public high school in this community." Another parent told me, "The public school where my child attended is a zoo."

The third factor is the most telling and the most threatening to the public schools. A key factor in the rapid growth of Christian education has been the ability of Christian schools to retain students once they are enrolled. The parents with whom I talked are generally well satisfied with the quality of education offered by Christian schools, and therefore they are willing to continue making the sacrifices required to keep their children enrolled there. More importantly, they are economically able to make the tuition payments, even without tax credits (although they may vote no on public school bond issues.)

One factor which contributes to this high level of satisfaction is the strong rapport which exists between Christian school teachers, and the students and parents whom they serve. Most of the parents I interviewed felt that teachers in Christian schools had a genuine commitment to their profession, while many teachers in the public schools did not. One student told me, "In the public schools, the teachers don't care. They don't care whether you learn; they don't care if you get beat up. All they're after is that big salary."

Another factor in the continuing parental support of Christian education is the small size of these schools, compared to the public schools of the community. Students felt that in public schools they knew none of the teachers and almost none of their classmates. In Christian schools, they knew all of the teachers and most of the student body. A frequent comment was, "It's just like one big family here - you know everybody."

Underlying all of these more apparent reasons for the growth of Christian schools are two more basic causes. One is a fundamental disagreement between public education and Christian education concerning the nature of man. Public education is predicated on the assumption that man is basically good and can be improved through education. Christian education on the other hand, begins with the premise that man is basically wicked, and requires first of all an infusion of Divine grace. One's view of human nature determines how one approaches the educational task; this is especially true of those founding these schools, and one has not grasped the full signifigance of Christian education until he is aware of this basic philosophical disagreement.[8]

The second factor underlying the rapid growth of Christian schools is what Alvin Toffler has called the "crackup of concensus."[9] The American system of universal public education has been possible because most Americans shared a large body of common values. This system of values, variously described as the Puritan ethic or American civil religion, has disappeared before the rapid technological and social changes of recent decades.

Toffler notes that in the past, one could usually expect the system of public values to remain largely unchanged throughout his lifetime, but this is no longer true.[10] The result has been what historian Barbara Tuchman has called "Two decades of collapsing assumptions."[11] In my judgment, Christian schools represent a reaction to these rapid changes and a withdrawal to the values of an earlier, more orderly, and less threatening world. In this respect, the fragmentation of American education is only a reflection of the increasing fragmentation of American society.

Out of this period of shifting values, a new concensus may eventually emerge; but until this happens, it seems reasonable to assume that Christian schools will experience continued growth in the years ahead. While my various figures provide some basis for analysis, few reliable statistics on Christian school enrollment are available, nor do we know much about their varied methods of operation or the quality of education they provide. A comprehensive nationwide survey of these schools is a primary area in which further research is needed.

It does seem clear that the rate of that growth will depend to some extent on the ability of public schools to solve their problems, the growth of fundamentalist churches, and the state of the American economy. Be that as it may, it appears that in this time of growing religious and political conservatism, we as educators must accustom ourselves to a world in which fundamentalist Protestant schools will play an increasingly significant role.

1. Virginia Davis Nordin and William Lloyd Turner, "More Than Segregation Academies: The Growing Protestant Fundamentalist Schools," Phi Delta Kappan, 61:6 (Feb. 1980), 391-394.

2. "Nonpublic Schools Look to Bright Future," New York Times Winter Survey of Education, 4 Jan. 1981, p. 1. However, in a letter to the author subsequent to the delivery of this paper, the National Center for Educational Statistics disputed the New York Times statement: "...our center has not estimated Christian school enrollment as exceeding or even nearing one million students." (Letter received from Mr. Dwight Crum of the National Center for Educational Statistics, 7 Oct. 1981.) This illustrates the difficulty of obtaining any accurate data on Christian School enrollment.

3. Jerry Falwell, Listen, America (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday and Co., 1980), p. 219; also in remarks broadcast on "The Old-Time Gospel Hour", 4 Jan. 1981.

4. R. J. Rushdoony, "The Battle Before Us," in The Separation of Church and Freedom, Kent Kelly, et.al., (Southern Pines, N. Car.: Calvary Press, 1980), p. 197.

5. Frank S. Mead, Handbook of Denominations in the United States, 6th ed., (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), p. 32.

6. William Lloyd Turner, "Reasons for Enrollment in Religious Schools: A Case Study of Three Recently Established Fundamentalist Schools in Kentucky and Wisconsin," Diss. Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison, 1979, pp. 117-122.

7. School District of Abingdon Township, Pennsylvania v. Schempp, 374 U.S. 203, 83 S.Ct. 1560, 10 L.Ed.2d 844 (1963); Engel v. Vitale, 370 U.S. 421, 82 S.Ct. 1261, 8 L.Ed.2d 601 (1962).

8. For a more complete discussion of this point, see Donald Oppenwald, "Humanism as the Religion of Public Education: Textbook Evidence," Christian Legal Society Quarterly, II:1 (Winter, 1981), pp 7-9, 31-33.

9. Alvin Toffler, Future Shock (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), pp. 304-305.

10. Toffler, p. 304. Note also the comments of Eric Ashby: "(heretofore, one) could assume that he would grow old in a world familiar to him as a youth...We are living in the first era for which this assumption is false, and we have not yet faced the consequences of this fact." Eric Ashby, quoted in "Excerpt from the Carnagis Report of 'Advanced Civic Learning'", The Chronicle of Higher Education, XXIII: 13 (25 Nov. 1981), p. 12.

11. Barbara Tuchman, A Distant Mirror - The Calimitous Fourteenth Century, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), p. XIII.